

Actors and Their Use of Avatars as Personal Mediators:

An Empirical Study of Avatar-Based Sense-Makings and Communication Practices in the Virtual Worlds of *EverQuest* and *Second Life*”

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Over the past five years, millions of actors have found it meaningful to move in and settle down in the Metaverse, for example, as an adventurous shaman in an advanced role-playing game such as EverQuest or as a businesswoman in the social world of Second Life. In this article, the main question therefore is: how do the actors and gamers of the two types of virtual worlds make sense of their avatars and the worlds when they act and communicate using their avatars as personal mediators? Participatory observations inspired by virtual ethnography and in-depth video-interviews were conducted to answer this question. The analysis of the substantial amount of empirical data draws on the concepts of intermediaries and mediators from actor-network theory (Latour, 1991, 1998, 2005), Sense-Making methodology (Dervin et al., 2003), social psychology (Yee, 2006), and experimental economics (Bloomfield & Rennekamp, 2008). It is shown how the actors create a personal story and history of their avatar that transforms them into the mediators of being in the virtual world, and also how the avatars act as the mediators that transform the actors themselves. To identify, understand, and keep track of the many transformations of meaning, Nick Yee's motivation factors (relationships, immersion, achievement, escapism and manipulation) have proven helpful also to the analysis of a social world like Second Life. In future studies, it is recommended that we study further the sense-makings of motivation factors such as creativity and experimentation.

Introduction

Over the past five years, virtual worlds have become so advanced and accessible that many people have found it meaningful to move in and settle down, for example, as an adventurous shaman in an advanced role-playing game such as EverQuest or as a businesswoman in the social world of

Second Life. Avatars of many shapes and design populate these massive multi-user online role-playing games, as well as the social worlds of the Metaverse (www.metaverseroadmap.org). In both cases, however, the avatars are the visual expression of the person who sits in front of the screen. In the virtual worlds, the actors and gamers know each other by their avatars. Thus, new ways to communicate have appeared on the virtual scene, and communicators need to master not only symbols, iconography and visual signs, but also the many 3D objects that act as the actants and mediators of action, communication practices and narrative experience.

The framing of action and communication differ from one world to another. For worlds such as EverQuest and Second Life, the difference is often emphasised. In EverQuest, the actors and gamers move into an imaginary world with advanced graphics and a game design that allow them to travel around zones with a variety of scenarios from forests, oceans, and cities to deserts and mountains. Within these different zones are quests and missions, and danger and horror lurk around every corner (Yee, 2004a, 2004b). In Second Life, the original idea of the producers of the world was to create an open space for user-driven design and innovation (Au, 2008; Malaby, 2009). The actors become residents of an abstract universe, a geometric and cartographic grid that takes shape and acquires meaning through the activity and communication of the residents.

Research Questions

As stated above, these two types of worlds in the Metaverse are different in terms of their ideas and design, but this study seeks to describe these differences when the worlds are seen from the perspective of the actors' and gamers' sense-makings in action, communication and experience. The questions asked in this article are: how do the actors and gamers of the two types of virtual worlds make sense of their avatars and the worlds when they act and communicate using their avatars as personal mediators? And what does it mean that the avatars have become personal mediators? To reflect on these questions, the actor-network theory (Latour, 1991, 1998, 2005) and Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin et al., 2003) form the analytical framework that guides the ongoing, as well as future, analyses of empirical data about actors' and gamers' sense-makings; data were produced from 2006 to 2008; and data will continue to be produced until 2011. This article draws on some of the initial analyses of data, and as such it is one of the empirical steps taken towards a theoretical analysis of the sense-makings and communication of actors and avatars of the Metaverse. Thus, the article is descriptive and it aspires to show some of the differences and similarities, diversities and variations of sense-makings and communication.

In the process of reflecting on the questions asked, first the analytical framework is introduced; it draws on the two actor-network concepts of intermediaries and mediators (Latour, 2005, pp. 37-42), and they are briefly introduced and followed by empirical findings from other studies and surveys (Fetcherin & Lattemann, 2007; Social Research Foundation, 2008; Yee, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008). Second, the empirical data about actors and avatars, together with excerpts of their narratives about their virtual practices and sense-makings, are presented and grouped thematically (Jensen, 2007, 2008). Finally, in the reflections and conclusions section, the research questions are addressed.

Analytical Framework

In his latest synthesis of the actor-network theory, Bruno Latour (2005) distinguishes between two means to produce the social associations that make societies and communities: intermediaries and mediators. They are seen as performative, rather than ostensive definitions, meaning that only when the social is performed is it social. Viewed this way, the intermediaries are black boxes that transport meaning; they do not transform the assemblages that make the black box. Unlike the intermediaries, the mediators are seen as continuous transformations of networks and assemblages; they transform rather than transport meaning. In other words, for intermediaries, the input defines the output of the black box, and there are no uncertainties. Considering the possible outputs of mediators in action, they cannot be foreseen by their inputs, they may appear to be uncertain and unforeseen. The distinction between intermediaries and mediators that transport, respectively, transform the meaning they carry; this is the basis for the understanding of avatars presented in this article.

Seen from the perspective of the actor-network theory, avatars are some of the actants that have decisive parts to play in the many narratives of the Metaverse. They have become personal mediators of communication that allow actors and gamers to contact and meet with each other, to build relationships, to create new experiences, and to make a reality of some of the new possibilities or face severe problems. Avatars move along, they struggle, buy brews, produce, and fall in love; but even if they give rise to a sense of freedom, it is the code and scripts that power them; that set the virtual world's conditions. In EverQuest, classes are scripted and programmed in relation to the social interactions of missions, raids and guilds. A shaman can do things that a gnome or troll cannot. In Second Life, there are repertoires of avatar templates and stereotypes from which new residents can choose; yet these figures remain open to subsequent and thorough adaptation and redesign. Although the avatars of Second Life are open to redesign, still the code and the scripts set the existential conditions that are imposed by others, once they are fixed. Viewed this way, avatars are born as the intermediaries of the virtual worlds and of the scripted roles and templates, but they come into being as personal mediators in a transformative process of adaptation and individuation, a process of sense-makings by which the actors and their avatars rise to the occasion.

Recently, several studies have been published based on empirical studies of virtual worlds (Boelsdorff, 2008; Schroeder, 2002, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Williams, 2007; Williams et al., 2008). Among those studying the massively multi-user, online role-playing games, Nick Yee's (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006, 2007) work stands out because of the contributions he has made to the understanding of driving motivations. His work identifies factors that motivate actors and gamers to engage with the advanced role-plays; his work is referred to in this article, and the factors referred to are: relations and relationships, manipulation, absorption, immersion, escapism, and performance or achievement (Yee, 2005, 2006). According to Yee, actors and gamers with high scores on the relationship factor have a desire to establish contact with other gamers and engage in meaningful social contacts with the mutual interest of supporting each other. These contacts may also allow problems and issues from other lives, offline, to form a component of being together in the virtual world. Role-players with a high score on the manipulation factor tend to make other gamers the objects of their manipulations. They enjoy bluffing, teasing, and dominating. When players have high scores on immersion

and absorption, it makes sense for them to be in a world of fantasy, a world that is not the same as the real world. These players seek to enjoy a good story and create figures that develop and maintain a personal world and history. A high score on escapism indicates that the role-players use the virtual world, at least temporarily, to forget problems and sources of stress in their other lives. Finally, a high score on the achievement factor seems to indicate that the gamers have a desire to become powerful through actions leading to results that show status and a powerful position. Of course, in most cases, several factors, or all of them, are part of the gamers gaming, but they reflect different weightings.

As for the actors in the social world of Second Life, currently there are no studies as thorough or as well-documented concerning the motivations and sense-makings as Nick Yee's work regarding online gaming worlds. However, based on Fetscherin and Lattemann's (2007) study and the Social Research Foundation's survey (2008), a sketch can be drawn. The data produced in these studies and surveys are not directly comparable to Yee's, whose theoretical approach is developed from social psychology. Further, Fetscherin and Lattemann's study of Second Life (250 respondents) is a background study aimed at educators and the Social Research Foundation's panel survey aims to draw a picture of background data relevant to in-world economies (1200 respondents from a panel of about 11,000). Note that the data of the latter are projective; the questions asked are about what the respondents intend to do and not what they have done, or actually do; the numbers referred to are approximate. When asked what they intend to do in Second Life, the highest score is socialising (1000/1200); next are shopping (950/1200) and creating (850/1200); there are lower ratings for a Second Life business (500/1200), professional activities (400/1200), and scientific meetings (100/1200). In Fetscherin and Lattemann's study (2007), the top-most rated experiences are those in Second Life that promote communication and collaboration and increase feelings of togetherness. Note that in this study, the questions asked are about experience and not intention. Finally, a distinction between immersionist, augmentationist and experimentalist in-world economics comes from the field of experimental economics; it is a heuristic based on experience. According to Robert Bloomfield (Bloomfield & Rennekamp, 2008; Metanomics, 2007, 2008a, 2008b), the immersionist economies are Second Life businesses that mainly focus on the in-world economies; augmentationists use Second Life for real life business purposes; whereas experimentalists are innovative in inventing new forms of economies.

Participatory Observations and Video-Interviews

The sense-makings of communication in *practices* are at the centre of the data produced in the current study. Therefore, participatory observation inspired by virtual ethnography is a prevailing method in the study of Second Life, and in-depth video-interviews were conducted in both types of virtual worlds; real life video-recordings (worlds.ruc.dk/streaming) have also been made, and archive studies carried out. Furthermore, active participation in real life as well as Second Life events is an important component of conducting the participatory observations. Observation sessions in Second Life 2006-2008 are documented in forty tableaux (Jensen, 2008b). The guiding foci of the observations, as well as the in-depth video-interviews, address five transformations in the tra-

jectories and chains of actor networks: 1) moving into the virtual world from the other life world; 2) transforming the self to become an avatar; 3) turning the avatar(s) into residents and inhabitants to become members of groups, guilds, projects and/or islands; 4) watching the avatar and the self from a virtual distance, thereby transforming the former perception of the self; and finally, 5) moving back and forth between the virtual and the other life (Jensen, 2007b, 2008a). In general, the observations fall into four periods of time. They form a curve of increasing and decreasing involvement. Introductory observations were carried out in Period I, wherein a general *overview* was generated and Danish *case studies* of relevance to the research were identified. This was followed by an increased intensity of *participation* in Periods II and III, including *active co-operation* with the actors of the study and their virtual world's activities, e.g., giving in-world talks and lectures, participating in raids and missions, giving in-world interviews, contributing to real life media coverage, and arranging in-world meetings and university workshops. The phase-out, in Period IV, was aimed to identify new cases for further research on the *international scene*. Thus, the in-depth and in-situ video-interviews of this study are not one-off instances; the actors and gamers are part of case studies.

The cases identified here are: Draconic Guardians – an EverQuest guild; Loner – an EverQuest group of friends; Wonderful Denmark – an in-world Second Life business; Times – a real life business with a branch in Second Life; Literary – a public institution's project in Second Life; and Metanomics (Metaverse and economics) – an in-world, weekly interview program broadcast by Second Life TV SLCN, and streamed out-world to the Metanomics web site. To qualify as a case study, several criteria were considered: first, a case was to be followed over time; second, it should exemplify different types of activity; third, the method of participatory observation should be applicable; fourth, the virtual life should be meaningful to the participating actors and gamers; and finally, the case should elucidate the five guiding foci of the study. Note that the fourth criterion excludes those actors who left the worlds or chose never to enter.

With a handheld camera, the participants of the video-interviews are followed "into" their virtual places – in live pictures of their screens – while they act online, and, simultaneously, offline discuss their interaction and agency, as we move along together in their virtual world. The method of acting online while simultaneously discussing and interpreting the actions in offline dialogues has been developed during the last fifteen years of studying networked communications, and, especially, in the study of virtual worlds since 2002 (Banks, 2001; Grimshaw, 2001; Jensen, 2005, 2007b; Pink, 2001).

Avatars that Make Sense to Their Actors

Avatars are an actor's personal mediator in the virtual worlds. They act and communicate as they express and present the actors in front of the screen. In the following, some of the avatars from the case studies and their owners are presented, and so are themes that make their avatars meaningful and personal from the perspective of their owners.

MARTIN is a high school student who dropped out of school soon after the video-interviews were conducted (Jensen, 2007b). At the time of this writing, he is back in high school. Martin is a young

expert in computer games, who has played many different genres of games. *Researcher* might be the name of his avatar(s), as he constantly changes and replaces the avatar to try out as many different worlds and games as possible. Therefore, at the time of the video-interviews, he has no steady avatar(s). SIA has just been awarded a disability pension at the time of the recordings (Jensen 2007b). She plays together with Janus as the guild leader of the Draconic Guardians. *The shaman Gelinu* is Sia's preferred figure; her main. Gelinu is almost like a goddess to Sia. The shaman must always be aware of what is happening, what the other players in the guild are doing, and what they need. She can increase their strength, speed, and their resilience, and she can prolong their lives. In short, the other players are dependent on their shaman Gelinu. It is demanding, but it is also a role that, if well-played, gives reason to be proud. There is no doubt that Sia is very proud of her Gelinu. JANUS is a student teacher and the father of two children (Jensen, 2007b). The *shadow knight Krongh* is the first avatar that Janus created for playing EverQuest. Krongh is his main. He is not a true warrior, but a mixture of a warrior and necromancer, who is good at casting death-spells. Krongh will never be as strong as either a true warrior or necromancer, but he merges the two. It takes finesse to merge them and play the figure well. Krongh can fake, which means that the monsters will miss him. This is an advantage in battle. He can also throw spells, which shortens the life of monsters. Further, he can infuriate the monsters so they focus their attention on him and not the other players. Therefore, in battle, he can help the other players of the guild. JAN is on the dole at the time of the video-interviews (Jensen, 2007b). He does temporary jobs when he has no money, which is often the case. He lives in a garage with none of the usual material comforts, such as running water, though in the garage he has a top-of-the-line computer. Jan has played EverQuest for several years. *Gnossiz the gnome* is his main, who travels around the far-flung landscapes and worlds on his magic carpet. There is pride in his voice when Jan introduces Gnossiz and his flying carpet. Gnossiz is good at going "solo", which means that he is less dependent on other players. A gnome is tiny, only half the size of the other characters and classes. The difference in size allows a David and Goliath sense, when the runt can trap large monsters and survive the many dangers everywhere in EverQuest.

MADS holds an MA in literature (Jensen, 2008a). He is temporarily employed and he is a member of the team that runs the Second Life project Literary. In this project, experiments are carried out to see if it makes sense to use Second Life in a public institution that provides a civic service. *Rob* represents the project; he is Mads' main avatar. At the outset, his hair resembled a punk-like Mohawk, and he had tattoos. After a while, the Mohawk was changed, he got new hair, a t-shirt with the project's name on it, and the eyes were enlarged to make him look happier. In Mads' view, Rob looked a little dangerous at the outset. This did not work well because he represents his workplace. There are limits to how a figure that represents a public workplace can be designed, says Mads.

JANNE is a librarian (Jensen, 2008a). She is a member of the same team as Mads and also one of the driving members and initiators of the project Literary. *Ann with the stylish shoes* is her avatar, which resembles her owner, only with longer legs, a slimmer waist and red hair, says Janne. The design of her facial expression has been carefully considered to make sure that she is not too baby-like. Her hair was template-like from the outset. Now, the red hair is flexible and covered by something that looks like a cap. It was found in a freebie shop. Janne can compromise as far as her appearance, hair,

and clothes, but when it comes to shoes, there are no compromises. Janne loves shoes in real as well as virtual life. Her shoes are not found in a freebie box, but are purchased, even if expensive. HELLE was employed at the time of the video-interviews as a human resource consultant with a company that has branches throughout the country and on the international scene (Jensen, 2008a). She has arranged a division of the company and is currently investigating whether there is potential for its development in a virtual world. *Hedda* is her mascot and a businesswoman. On the one hand, Helle's avatar is a fantasy figure, a mascot that resembles a sweet and funny balloon, yet on the other, she is a business-like avatar; her virtual wardrobes are about to burst. She has made an effort not to look sexy, not least because she is in Second Life on behalf of her real life company. She examines the innovative opportunities of Second Life for her offline firm. Her avatar must be trustworthy, it must invite others to chat, but it should also be a little unusual and therefore easily recognisable.

THOMAS is a computer programmer and an entrepreneur (Jensen, 2008a). He runs several virtual islands and a business as a virtual real estate agent. With his virtual company, he rents out land and buildings. His avatar is the real estate agent *Doc Aspen*. Thomas says that he is not really interested in the look of his avatar. But then again, he knows that if the design of his avatar is not convincing, it may be difficult to do business in Second Life. His customers will doubt him, and it will be difficult to build the trust and respect that is needed. The facts are made clear to Thomas one day when, after months of intensive design work, he is confronted with Doc Aspen's appearance. He looks like a newbie; a beginner with default clothes and hairstyle. Instead, Doc Aspen's appearance should show him as a trustworthy real estate agent, he is told by fellow avatars. KAREN is a student (Student's blog, 2008). She participated in a workshop about virtual worlds held in 2008 at the Communication Studies department, Roskilde University. *Student* is her avatar, which was created to participate in the workshop about communicating in virtual worlds. ROBERT is a professor at Cornell University, at the Johnson Graduate School of Management (Jensen, 2008c; worlds.ruc.dk). He runs the weekly interview show *Metanomics* with CEOs, artists, entrepreneurs, designers, and decision-makers of importance to the virtual worlds; the interviews are about the economics and politics of Second Life. The shows are broadcast widely in-world by SLCN and on the *Metanomics* web site. *Beyers Sellers* is his TV host and research avatar. His avatar's style is very much like a real life TV host. Several members of his staff have helped style the avatar to make it look as convincing as possible to convey an image of the professionalism of the show that he is running. *Beyers Sellers* is an in-world brand so he can not just change his avatar's appearance without impacting the show and the in-world brand.

These are the actors who in the following describe their experiences, motivations and sense-makings of communicating in different practices with their avatars serving as personal mediators.

Themes and Sense-Makings of Narratives

The building of *social relationships* is a thread through each of the narratives. Social relationships are easily built in a virtual world and it is a virtual communication practice that makes sense to all of the participants in the study. Contacts and relationships may be binding and commercial, non-binding

and playful, or emotional. Communicating in *social networking* is also a recurring theme. In a new world and with a pioneering spirit, it is vital for all community members to help each other to build close relationships based on mutual help. There are many narratives about the positive contacts and relationships of social networking, even between competitors.

"Your network is, in fact, very important in Second Life. Well, I know a lot of scripters and builders, who will help me for almost no money in here." --Helle

On the other hand, the well-connected social networks may also serve as chains of gossip, which travel quickly in all social circles, and where the other avatars are frequently subjected to observation and judgement. There are also strong standards and norms that provide evidence of binding relationships. Group or guild members will be frowned upon for violating social norms. In Second Life they may be excluded from an island and group, while in EverQuest they may be thrown out by the guild leader and excluded from zones.

"In here [EQ], I can not lie. You can not escape; you can not escape from who you are. It took me 13-14 months to reach the level that I am now. I have spent a lot of time on it. Thus, your image! That is what you write, and how you act. It has an impact right away, contrary to this [the offline] world." --Jan

Creative opportunities and *great experiences* are frequently mentioned. The virtual world is perceived as a series of opportunities. There is room for new ideas, and it seems relatively easy to make them a reality. The experience of creating a new world and exploring it is a theme and thread that occurs again and again; a world with a sense of freedom, creative power and great experiences. Some actors feel as if the only limitations to the development of opportunities are the boundaries set by their creative powers.

"Here, we have a whole world, where you can freely run around; a world where you live and build together with up to 20,000 other people. It really makes sense. You will play the same character for a long time, [and] all the time you spend, you do it for something. You become an in-world character; you can build a castle and a country." --Martin

Viewed in this way, the virtual worlds provide creative opportunities, fantasy, fiction and a playground for exploration. The theme of adventures and unusual experiences are apparent in some of the narratives.

"I think it is okay to have such bling [meditation bubbles] in here [Second Life]; something that is fun and can convey an experience. If I turn on the music, it is fun to go into those spacey bubbles. It brings such an almost psychedelic, out-of-body-like experience, a great all-embracing experience. I think it is quite cool! Maybe it is a childish joy." --Janne

Experimenting with personal and social boundaries is another theme of the narratives. One's own and others' boundaries can be challenged, both personally and socially. To build and inhabit new spaces, rooms, buildings and places that are different from everyday life, to be able to break with traditions and thus get to experience and know yourself and others in new ways; these are things that make sense to some of the actors. This can be said of social relationships between avatars, as well as for relationships in the everyday life of the outside world.

"In here, we react to people. What you are trying to achieve, or the borders that you try to move, they do not consist of the game world. It is all about organising clans and influencing people." --Martin

The virtual experiments also give rise to negative and critical reactions in cases where the experiments are not personal but professional and involve some of the public institutions of society.

"It provoked so many people that we did not accept the prejudices about our institution in Second Life. We just tried out things and experimented to see what could be done and what made sense." --Mads

The interweaving of different *forms of communication* is also subject to experiments and exploration. The Instant Messages (IM), chat and voice chat are modes of communication well known from other online media. However, the virtual worlds allow the actors to create and explore them in new modes of interplay. One of the differences that separates these worlds from other online media is that in the virtual world, actors have a sense of being together at the same place and in a mutual experience. They can see each other, travel around a world together, go dancing or to a concert, watch TV or movies together, even visit a pub and drink a beer. Being present together with friends or colleagues in a mutual experience while simultaneously running several dialogues and threads of communication with the present group as well as many other friends or groups is a typical mode of communication in a virtual world. It creates a cacophony of communication that may at first seem confusing, and so can lead to a breakdown in communication.

It takes substantial training to master the many modes of simultaneous communication, if one's virtual existence is aimed at professional purposes. Chat bridges enable communication back and forth between the virtual worlds and other locations, such as chatting on a web site. Thus, the communicator will also have to take into consideration that audiences are located in different contexts: in-world actors are present together as avatars, whereas on the web site, the actors are each located in front of their computer. Beyers Sellers introduces each talk-show this way:

"We encourage you also to keep up a lively chat during today's show. In my own personal view, one of the signature advantages of conducting live events in Virtual Worlds is the ability to [allow] what would have to be called a 'cacophony of discussions' in simultaneous text chats with a more focused conversational voice." --Robert

Knowledge production and learning are complex processes in EverQuest as well as Second Life. It may take half a year to learn the necessary skills and to build the knowledge and experience needed to succeed in these worlds. Furthermore, it is knowledge that varies depending on the purpose of the avatar class in play, and in relation to different zones in an EverQuest guild or of the groups and islands in Second Life. Learning, knowledge construction and experience are part of all the narratives about how one evolves from being a newbie into building up personal knowledge and gaining the experience necessary, both good and bad, to become a master. It is difficult to cope with the many learning demands alone and on one's own. Therefore, most worlds have dedicated communities that exchange and systematise experience, often by running associated web sites and blogs. Often the simplest way is to ask other gamers or residents of the world for help.

"Often, you can just rely on other people. They have the knowledge. So you can ask others. You cannot get all the knowledge by yourself, so you will have to specialise." --Jan

Business and business networks are instances of binding social relationships. Running a business in Second Life affects the avatar's appearance, communication and social norms. The aim is to maintain an excellent reputation and image and to be able to control the narratives about the business that circulate in the social networks. If you want to run a successful enterprise, whether it is trading in virtual or real life objects and services, then "impression management" is an important part of the virtual business strategies.

"I have been careful to design how I look. [My avatar, Hedda, wears] clothes with a professional image that I would wear in everyday work in the outside world." --Helle

An avatar's image should not be too challenging or fabulate when it comes to business. It may also harm one's reputation if an avatar known in-world as a manager looks too newbie-like. Customers may then find it difficult to trust the manager's skills and abilities. A well-known owner of a Danish island in Second Life says:

"The first two months in here I only used a default avatar. Appearance! It has never really interested me – neither in real life nor in Second Life. It was not until I got some complaints from people, who said that I looked stupid, [that] I thought, 'well, I better do something about it.'" --Thomas

In business, a good reputation and a willingness to exchange ideas, even with competitors, is important. This is worthwhile because often the ideas are tenfold increased in a sharing virtual network, notes Helle.

"I come up with strange ideas all the time, and I have found a way to have an open dialogue with one of my main competitors." --Helle

Leadership and organisation are required to master the knowledge sharing and learning necessary to meet the many demands and difficulties that come with projects, business strategies, or the large missions and raids of the role-playing games. In a world like EverQuest, management is a part of the game. There will be a designated guild leader when a guild is created and, depending on the size and complexity of the guild, there will be designated groups of middle managers and officers. It is difficult to keep track of 100-150 members of a guild – all with multiple avatars that can each do something different.

“Previously, we were in another guild, where I was also the guild leader. I had a co-leader and some officers. It was a really great guild, but there were so many members, 100-150. That is difficult to manage as it is so time-consuming.” --Sia

The task of organising the right team with the right skills, levels, and roles is a major puzzle, and one that has quite a lot in common with other types of human collaboration.

“We know each other’s style of play. It is very important in a game like EverQuest. You cannot manage things yourself. It is the ultimate [test] of teamwork. You need to fit everything and everybody together; and you must do your share of the work.” --Janus

Achievement and status are important factors for both the role-playing gamers and the residents of a social world. Actors and groups must dedicate their effort, time and energy; with that comes an eagerness to communicate achievement and status. In EverQuest, an avatar’s status is immediately recognised as levels and experience points place avatars in a ranking. You get power and status from being at a high-level. It is a kick to have a high status; the “coolest of cool” experiences, says Martin.

“It feels as if you, from one day to another, suddenly have become incredibly important. There is not a feeling better than that. YES!” --Martin

In Second Life, the expression of status is implicit. Much weight is placed on the avatar’s image, performance and achievements, whether it is an avatar known for running a successful business, who does fabulous design, creates cosy places, arranges great concerts, runs TV shows, or creates worlds that attract attention. But, with an avatar that looks like a novice or a newbie, its status is almost always low.

“The initial reactions and comments I [got] as an inexperienced newbie avatar were about my status as a newbie. In the interaction with other avatars, I was positioned as a helpless ‘poor’ [person] in relation to assertive statements such as ‘it is also clear that it is a new world for you’ and ‘I can see that you feel [you are] among strangers.’” --Karen

Manipulation and harassment are part of the virtual worlds' downside. Moreover, some people in virtual worlds sabotage meetings or other events. They may do this in the form of virtual bombs, starting a countdown, disturbing everyone in the vicinity, which then explodes. Or, it may be inserting animations that disrupt and paralyse an entire island; the pleasure comes from being able to control the world and then watch it from the sidelines.

"A wizard is an illusionist who can fool the other avatars in a group. He can cause disunity in the group and get them to fight against each other. And then he can just watch from the sidelines and laugh at them." --Jan

Reflections and Conclusions

To reflect on the research questions stated earlier, the actors' sense-makings, as they are expressed by their avatars and in the many narratives, are now held together with an analytical framework. The point of departure of the reflections is the set of motivation factors identified by Nick Yee (2005, 2006). Compared to Fetscherin and Lattemann's findings (2007), it seems that both studies point out that the building of social relationships is the most important factor in the actors' motivations; this applies to the findings of this study as well – for the role-playing game EverQuest as well as the social world of Second Life. Some of the keywords of the sense-makings are: friendships, attraction, feelings, love affairs, personal and professional networking, and mutual help. The immersion factor also plays an important part in the actors' narratives, with keywords such as: fun, fantasy, great experiences, imagination and exploration. Again, these apply for the role-playing games as well as the social world. Furthermore, in both types of world, achievement and status are threads of sense-makings with the keywords including: leadership, organisation, influence, power, importance, mastering, knowledge and business results. Manipulation as a motivating factor appears with keywords such as: disunity, turn against each other, get avatars to fight, watch from the sidelines and laugh. The escapism factor also needs to be addressed. In Nick Yee's study (2006), escapism is defined by the amount of time spent in a virtual world. If forty or more hours per week are spent in the virtual environment, then it approaches escapism, in his view. However, in some of the cases studied, actors are present forty hours or more, for example, if they are running a business or conducting other professional activities. This is especially true if they are trying to make a living from their virtual business. Thus, it is necessary to look at many factors other than time spent when it comes to the question of escapism. Lastly, there is a difference between the factors of importance in the present study and the motivation factors identified by Nick Yee: almost as important as the building of social relationships are the creative and experimental aspects of the worlds with keywords such as: find new ways, challenge personal and social boundaries, explore new forms of communication, create new worlds, and change professions. Compared also to the Social Research Foundation's results, these are factors with very high scores. In Bloomfield and Rennekamp's (2008) heuristics, experimental economics is one of the three forms mentioned – it may be summarised by the label: "not possible in real life" economies (Metanomics, 2008a). The immersionist economies

target the virtual markets of labour, design and services, whereas the augmentationists use the virtual for out-world purposes, or vice versa. In the real estate agency case of this study, there is, however, a mix of the two in the sense that design and services are targeted in-world, whereas payment and contracts, preferably, are dealt with in the outside world's currency rather than L\$, and with actors rather than avatars. In this way, the potential of building a new business model is explored in actual business. This example of the creative and experimental aspects indicates that these opportunities – be they in business, arts, education or management – are important motivating factors of the sense-makings that need to be further researched.

As for the question of how actors make sense of their avatars, the following sketches can be drawn.

Achievement and status are very important factors for Martin. He aims to explore his own boundaries, and to experiment with his abilities to influence and organise the other gamers. But, he also enjoys a good story, the imaginative worlds and their creative possibilities. Achievement, immersion and experiments make sense to Martin when he plays a diverse range of avatars. Jan wants to develop Gnosiz to become a cunning figure with power, knowledge and intelligence, but he is also delighted by manipulation. The escapism factor may also be part of his sense-makings; playing the Gnosiz figure, he emphasises that, in his view, the ethical status of the virtual is superior to the other life-world. Achievements and manipulation make sense to Jan when he plays as Gnosiz the gnome. Janus and Sia's outlook on the virtual life of the communities of guilds and gamers centres on an ideology and an interest in social utopia. Their desire is to build a community of high ideals based on mutual help with relationships of reciprocity and ethics. Social relationships are the most important factors in their sense-makings. Although they share the same ideals, there are also differences. Playing her shaman Gelinu, Sia's concern is how best to strengthen the other members of the guild. She is constantly aware of their needs, but performance and achievement also means a lot, not just to have an avatar of power and leadership, but also to play Gelinu as versatile as possible. Sia wants Gelinu to be a high-level figure in battle as well as in professions such as craft and trade. Achievement makes sense to Sia as Gelinu the shaman. The amazing and fabulous aspects fascinate Janus. He enjoys a world of fantasy and plays Krongh with finesse, rather than as an avatar of power. He is seeking and creating a complex figure that is fun to play. Janus seeks no satisfaction in achievement, rather he enjoys playing a figure with a personal and unique history. Immersion in the fabulous universe makes sense to Janus when he plays Krongh the shadow knight.

Coming up with crazy ideas, building professional networks, sharing ideas, even with competitors, learning by experience, utilising creative options, being open to possibilities and other residents of Second Life all make sense to Helle, when she is in-world with her avatar Hedda. To make a reality out of crazy ideas, to find new ways necessary to make the impossible possible, and to solve the problems that arise, Helle engages herself in the virtual world. Social relationships and creative experiments make sense to her. Mads will also break new ground and find new ways of working, even if they may appear silly at first. He is eager to experiment, provoke and discuss the traditions of the civic services of his workplace in the spirit of new possibilities. It makes sense to Mads to be

in-world with his avatar Rob, as the figure represents his workplace and makes it possible to challenge the boundaries set by tradition. Experimenting with Rob as a tool for change makes sense to him. Janne finds that being in Second Life should be fun, provide cool and all-embracing experiences, and create strange universes where one can disappear into another world. She seeks alpha waves, something cool and childish joy. It also makes sense for her to use Ann to gather groups of interested avatars who are eager to discuss if virtual worlds can be used to expand and transform the services that she provides as an employee of a public institution in the offline world. Immersion and experimentation make sense to Janne when she is in-world as Ann. Necessity, purpose, realism, conviction, professionalism, business, control, order and precision are keywords that describe what makes sense to Thomas. His avatar, Doc Aspen, is not very important to him; it is simply a tool by which he can make a reality of his virtual business. But, Thomas' realism is coupled with a desire to break new ground and to find new ways, both in his virtual business and personally. It is difficult, but it is made possible through hard work and with new ideas. Achievements and experimentation make sense to Thomas when he is in-world with his avatar Doc Aspen.

In conclusion, by following the actors and observing how they communicate in their virtual practices in the worlds of EverQuest and Second Life, we can now draw a rough sketch of what happens when they use their avatars as personal mediators. As mentioned above, mediators transform the meanings that they carry. On the one hand, in the process of making sense of their virtual world, the actors are transformed and become avatars, while on the other, the avatars also transform the actors. There is a continuous interplay of transformation of meaning going on. In the narratives about their chosen avatars, their persona and performance, the actors create a personal story and history of the avatar that transforms the pre-programmed and template-like intermediaries into the mediators of being in the virtual world. When the actors communicate with their avatars in the communities of the virtual, then the avatars also act as the mediators and actants that transform the actors themselves. Martin, a high school student, is transformed into a systematic researcher and expert when he joins his many games with a variety of avatars as his mediators. Jan, who is on the dole, is transformed into an empowered, cunning and knowledgeable actor of the virtual when he enters the world with his avatar Gnessiz the gnome. Sia, a disability pensioner, is transformed into a highly regarded and high-level leader and organiser, when she plays the shaman Gelinu. Janus, a student teacher, turns into a dreamer and ideologist when he enters EverQuest with Krongh the shadow knight. Helle, a human-resource consultant, transforms and becomes a business manager, experimental entrepreneur, and network builder when she is present in-world with Hedda as her mediator. Mads, an academic, becomes a provocateur who challenges tradition when he enters the virtual with Rob as his mediator. Janne, a librarian, is transformed into a joyful child and a provocateur of the traditions of her profession. Thomas, a programmer, turns out to be a business manager and virtual entrepreneur when Doc Aspen is his mediator in Second Life. Finally, Robert, a professor, becomes a professional journalist and known in-world TV host who experiments with new forms of communication when the avatar Beyers Sellers is his mediator.

To identify, understand and keep track of the many transformations of meaning, it seems that

the factors identified by Nick Yee, although originally clarified in relation to role-playing games, may well form a starting point for further studies. They have proven helpful in the interpretations of the diverse corpus of the current study's data. As they do not fully cover the field, they are open to improvement, and with reference to Bloomfield's heuristics, I will recommend that we look further into the fields of creativity and experimental activity.

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